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INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUEHWR/AMEMBASSY WARSAW 0102
RUEHCD/AMCONSUL CIUDAD JUAREZ 0100
RUEHOS/AMCONSUL LAGOS 6056
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
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TAGS: ASEC PGOV PHUM KCRM NI
SUBJECT: SHOOTOUT IN PORT HARCOURT

REF: LAGOS 0058

Classified By: Political Counselor Russell J. Hanks. REASONS 1.5(B & D).).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The shootout in Port Harcourt January 28 occurred as policemen detained the leader of a group known as the "Outlaws" at his church on Sunday morning. His detention was soon communicated to both the state commander of the Mobile Police and to the detainee's supporters. The ensuing shootout continued through most of the day and while official figures put the number of deaths at seven, it appears that about 20 died throughout the city. Two police facilities and a number of vehicles were destroyed and about 120 detainees fled in the confusion. According to Port Harcourt residents, the gunfire was the worst they had experienced recently and the action only highlights the continued inability of the Nigerian Police Force to respond to security challenges in the increasingly volatile region. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The shootout in Port Harcourt on January 28 occurred as policemen detained Sogbomo George, the leader of a criminal group known as the "Outlaws," at an Anglican church in Port Harcourt on Sunday morning. The head of the Rivers State Mobile Police (MoPol) told PolCouns that George was initially stopped for driving an SUV with tinted windows and that he was using a phony identification. According to the Commissioner, George was then taken to the "central police station" for detention. Before arriving at the station, however, the police realized his true identity. George, who still had his cell phone with him, was able to notify his supporters of his arrest.

¶3. (C) The first encounter between police and George's militants took place on the way to the police station. According to an eyewitness, the police passed a roadblock near the GRA area of Port Harcourt where they encountered about six militants. The police told the eyewitness to "get out quickly before bullets fly" and he was able to seek refuge in the housing area. By this time, both the militants and the police had called for reinforcements. In spite of their efforts the main body of militants were able to move from the prison to the Criminal Investigation Division and then to the Central Police Station.

¶4. (C) Other witnesses say that the militants were armed with "automatic weapons and explosives" and police sources confirm that dynamite was used on vehicles near at least one of the stations. The battle reportedly continued until about midnight although the official announcement says that the battle ended before 10PM. A police spokesman says that

seven people died in the fighting, but from other reports it appears that about 20 died throughout the city. It is unclear if the reported casualties included police or militants.

¶5. (C) An NGO contact says that about 120 detainees were freed in the confusion, including Sogbomo George. He also says that the CID and the police station suffered heavy damage during the attacks. A dual-citizen Nigerian reported that the gunfire was the worst she had experienced recently in the city.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: While initially the police did not know who they had apprehended, they quickly realized that it was George, who has been a fugitive since he broke out of the Port Harcourt prison in 1995. In spite of their efforts, the police found themselves outgunned and outmaneuvered on January 28 and were unable to counter the militant attacks. This incident highlights the continued inability of the Nigerian Police Force to respond to security challenges, even those created by a group that is relatively limited in size in comparison to others, in this increasingly volatile region.
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